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!! OVERALL WINNER!!

IMAGE OF CHOSEN CREATURE *(see below)*



Momentum

by Alanna Davey

Ahead of her was desolation, behind her, the moon. Each *scht* *scht* of her scales against the dry, packed dirt echoed and soon disappeared, the only sounds in a world deafened by silence.

By the absent gods, if she could just get the tense muscles of her face to relax...

She'd traveled through evening and into the thin veil of dusk before finally coming upon the ruins. Broken and unrecognizable, they jutted upwards and tangled in shadow, illuminated by cold moonlight. What was this place, and what was this mad grin stretching across her face? Why couldn't she seem to make it go away?

The wind blew in, scattering locks of her stringy hair. With a careful talon she brushed them away from her sharpened canines and continued on.

She'd learned that the tall buildings were always the first to go. In time, weeds became trees and broke apart the concrete, and then metal rusted, corroded, buckled. In the end every last of the giants would fall, a tower to a long-forgotten desire. But she hadn't seen so much as a mossy rock and the ground remained parched, dust swirling with each turn of the breeze. Here there was only stillness, and a chill so bitter she could smell it in the air.

Still, she moved among the fallen skyscrapers, passed the crumbling pavements and the shattered glass, until—as if an immense shadow had engulfed the world—she stepped into darkness. The moon hung low where she'd left it, and the sky all around it gaped on, cloudless, treeless. The darkness, she saw, began beneath her feet, and stretched across every shell of a building, every scrap of a wall. It shrouded surfaces like soot, and yet it covered so completely, with such density, that it seemed no light could reflect back and return. As though every small particle disappeared inside, swallowed whole.

And still, seized by an uncanny contraction of her muscles, she grinned.

She'd heard rumors of places like this; hidden places, mislaid places, where there wasn't simply destruction, but obliteration. In one fell swoop, everything had come to a racing end, so fast you could taste blood before it even hit.

She could turn around, she could go back and circumvent the place, abandon the time and energy it had cost her. But her legs would not listen.

Schtk. Schtk. Further and further and the world became dimmer, more obscure and removed. She was traveling into the blackest part of night, the darkness of a deep cave or the waiting maw of a larger, stranger beast than herself. The assuring moonlight at her shoulder had by now dissolved quietly into nothing.

Before long there was no direction, no up or down or right or left, and the small solace of forward tightened around her neck, a noose. She stumbled over unseen debris, feeling it tug at her throat. After all, who knew what she journeyed into, except perhaps, those absent gods who had ruled here. Was there an end? Or would these ruins continue on and on for miles, leaving her wandering within them, sightless and at their mercy?

Maybe this was no smile, but a grimace of fear. A physical response to the creeping, rising uneasiness that had begun inside her as soon as she'd seen this cursed place, its lingering mar on the horizon.

And just when she thought the obscurity couldn't get any more oppressive, it began to lighten. The source was a point suspended before her, diffuse and thin, but it was still a destination. She headed towards it blindly, hopeful for an end. But what she'd seen paling the air was not the moon glinting off burnished metal, or even the rising glow of the red sun—it was a dim light atop an ornate pole, a solitary stanchion against the encroaching night.

She peered up at it, the swirled surface of glass and the sharp brightness it held within its globe. All around her it cast unshaped shadows, a series of wavering, flitting wraiths moving from crumbled brick to jagged metal.

The radiant object was so untouched, so complete in this landscape of pieces and broken remains, that she couldn't identify it, could not begin to guess its use. She knew without a doubt however, that it was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen, a self-sustaining light emerging from the profound emptiness of loss.

She reached a talon to her aching lips and smiled. Her journey was not over.